

Kafka for the Kindergarten Set

Just as Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative cut down more trees and his Clean Skies Initiative increased pollution, his No Child Left Behind Act hurt students, especially poor students. That this is a controversial statement shows just how rare genuine child advocates are (compared to, say, environmentalists) in policy debates.

NCLB requires every school administer standardized tests to their students. If the scores are bad, they get punished. (This makes as much sense as beating kids who lose races.) And it only gets worse from there. Making high test scores the ultimate goal of education distorts everything along the way, sending schools spiraling own into a Kafkaesque nightmare of bureaucratic child torture.

The story is told in up-close detail in Linda Perlstein's *Tested*, a profile of Tyler Heights elementary in Maryland. It's a tale of such thoroughgoing rot that it's hard to even know where to begin. But let's start with the tests. They're invasive and traumatic. They take time and teachers away from class and scare students (especially since the kids are led to believe they won't graduate if they fail). They test narrow, specific knowledge in dumb ways ("What text features made the directions [in this cookie recipe] easy for third graders to follow?"). And they make kids feel like failures in situations where teachers are prohibited from helping.

The tests are just plain bad. Their questions are invariably annoying and sometimes just plain bizarre ("Which word is made up of two words?"). Of the handful of examples in the book (which are for 3rd graders), even I get some of them wrong. They assume weird background knowledge (which two presses are the same? "don't press me", "full-court press", "tailor press", "press agent", "pressing for an answer") and strange vocab (crabapples and cattails) and are just terribly written, full of stilted jargon.

But that's just the beginning. Since the tests are so all-important, everything gets pushed around for them. Art and gym are cancelled (although, for contractual reasons, not in the school Perlstein studied) since they're not tested, as is recess (this despite evidence recess improves test scores!). But even more absurdly, science and social studies are canceled too, since the test questions don't address them.

The remaining time is spent teaching to the test. Test language infiltrates everything. The only writing students ever do is sample short-answer sections ("What text feature could have been added to help a reader better understand the information?", as opposed to writing your own story). Even the stories kids read are analyzed only in terms of potential test questions.

Much of class is filled with pure test-prep: no actual education, just test-taking tricks. Some of it is common stuff — take deep breaths, work until the time is called, eliminate obviously wrong answers — but most of it is specific to the state's bizarre test (special rules about how to phrase written answers and which words to use for extra points). The walls are filled with the school's four-point plans for successful responses, e.g. BATS, which stands for "borrow from the question, answer the question, use text supports, stretch formula".

It only gets worse from there. Apparently even non-stop test prep doesn't raise scores enough, so schools are forced to use "evidence-based curricula" like "Saxon Math" and "Open Court Reading". These are special packages of textbooks and workbooks and scripts for the teachers which prescribe specifically which stories and "text features" should be taught in which order and in which way. (Teachers can't deviate from the script, of course, because that's not "evidence-based".) The whole system must be purchased for a small fortune from a major textbook company and supervisors occasionally drop in to make sure the books are being used appropriately.

It's clear the books don't teach any actual understanding; they're just teaching kids to memorize the answers to various test prep questions. When asked a question, the students just cycle through random combinations of test buzzwords until they hit upon the right answer. Since they never get to read for fun, or even read for anything other than dissecting text features, they presumably learn to hate reading too.

But the stilted curricula is just the beginning of the scammers. In their desperation to raise scores up, schools are open to predation by a whole suite of consultants and teams who promise to have the winning secret to raising test scores. (One of the book's most poignant scenes comes at an educational conference, when one such scam artist takes credit for the profiled school's test score rise.) And so the teachers are forced to do absurd things like write the state educational guidelines they plan to fulfill that day on the board, assign practice tests weekly, have their teaching evaluated by non-educators who observe them for fifteen minutes, and hold school assemblies on test prep featuring men in furry blue muppet costumes.

Together, it's a frightening picture: no recess, no science, no social studies, no leaving your chair or working in groups, just sitting in your seat, listening to scripts and test-prep advice, before worrying you're about fail school because you have no idea what they're saying. This is what they mean when they say "No Child Left Behind".

Every year, a couple months before school ends, a kind of controlled experiment happens in NCLB schools: The principal remains the same, the teachers remain the same, the students remain the same. The only thing that changes is that the test is over, forgotten until next year starts. And suddenly everything changes: test prep boards come off the wall, students start writing poetry, they go on field trips and do science experiments, they work in groups and do real reading.

I challenge anyone to watch both schools and insist that the first is better for our kids. I don't think you could do it. So, of course, nobody watches. Decisions on these laws are made far away, in DC, by folks whose only experience of public school comes from staged photo ops.

Everyone loves to critique No Child Left Behind. Democrats say it isn't fully funded, Republicans say it interferes too much with local control of schools. But this is just tinkering around the edges — nobody disagrees with the fundamental premise. After all, what politician can be against accountability?

The only question left is: who will hold them accountable?

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